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SUBJECT: NUTS AND BOLTS OF BULGARIA'S JUNE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: For the second time since EU accession, Bulgarians go to the polls June 7 to elect 17 members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Generating little public interest on their own, the MEP elections are viewed more as dress rehearsal for national parliamentary elections on July 5. The MEP election campaign -- scheduled to open officially May 16, but effectively already in full swing -- will be dominated by domestic rather than European issues as the parties jockey for position before the real electoral race in July. The opposition will hammer the coalition government for widespread corruption and bungling of Sofia's relations and reputation with the EU, while the ruling Socialists will tout their steady handling of the economy amid global financial turbulence. Each of the parties has stacked appealing personalities at the top of the lists (the Socialists with FM Kalfin; the center-right with former FM Mihailova; the king's party with popular EU Commissioner Kuneva). Polls suggest that Sofia Mayor Boyko Borissov's opposition party GERB will come out on top with the Socialists running second. Expected low voter turnout will benefit parties with dependable electorate such as the extreme nationalist Ataka and the ethnic Turkish party MRF. END SUMMARY.

MEP ELECTION NUTS AND BOLTS

¶2. (U) Bulgarians will elect 17 MEPs (down from 18 in the previous European Parliament) for a five-year term through a proportional representation system in which parties and coalitions put up rank-ordered national lists of candidates. Voters cannot add or delete names on the party lists but they may mark their preferred candidate on the party list by checking the box opposite their name.

In practice, voters choose among slates of candidates ranked by party headquarters and each vote is effectively for party rather than individual. Parties must obtain one seventeenth of all valid votes (or 5.88 percent) to participate in the distribution of the 17 seats. Seats are allocated to parties exactly according to their share of the national vote. Votes of parties not passing the threshold go to the other parties using the method of the smallest remainder.

¶3. (U) The election is organized and supervised by a Central Electoral Commission (CEC), whose 25 members are nominated by political parties represented in the national and European parliaments. The same Commission will organize both the MEP elections and the general elections on July 5. Bulgarian and EU citizens are eligible to run for an MEP seat if they have turned 21 years of age and if they have resided within the EU for at least two years prior the vote.

VOTING RULES

¶4. (U) Bulgarians and other EU citizens who have held official residence within an EU state for at least three months prior to the election date are eligible to vote in the Bulgarian MEP elections. The voting age is 18. According to official data, there are 6.9 million eligible voters in Bulgaria, but CEC officials acknowledge these numbers need updating and the true figure is probably about one million fewer. Diplomatic and consular missions set up polling stations abroad if at least 20 voters have registered with the

mission for the vote. Bulgarian legislation does not allow absentee ballots -- citizens must cast their vote in person.

CAMPAIGNS AND FINANCING

15. (U) The June 7 election is preceded by a three-week campaign beginning on May 16. Campaigning is forbidden on election day but this is the first post-communist election in which campaigning will be allowed on the day preceding the vote. Incumbent MPs, MEPs, members of EU bodies, and national government employees running in the election must take a leave of absence for the campaign. Parties finance campaigns with their own funds and with donations from individual sponsors, which cannot top 10,000 leva (USD 6,666). Parties are banned from receiving donations from Bulgarian and foreign private companies, foreign individuals and governments. Parties and coalitions are required to set up a public registry listing sponsors of their election campaigns. The overall amount used to finance the campaign of one candidate list cannot exceed two million leva (USD 1.3 million). According to new election law amendments, all campaign materials must carry a sign warning that vote-buying and vote-selling are crimes.

POLLING AND RESULTS

16. (U) Polling stations will open at 6 a.m. and close at 7 p.m. Exit polls are allowed, but results cannot be announced before polling stations close. In practice this rule is consistently violated. The CFC usually announces preliminary results within several hours of poll closing. The CEC announces the results for parties and coalitions within three days of the vote and publishes the names of the elected MEPs within five days of the vote.

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DRESS REHEARSAL FOR JULY VOTE

17. (SBU) Generating little interest on their own, the MEP elections are seen as more of a dress rehearsal for the national parliamentary elections on July 5. Parties will test and fine tune tactics and set the attack scenarios on opponents. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which leads the current three-party coalition, faces a strong challenge in both elections from Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov's opposition GERB party. Expected low turnout (pollsters put it around 30 percent) will benefit parties with highly dependable electorate such as the extreme nationalist Ataka and the ethnic Turkish party MRF. With these four parties likely to win seats, the real question will be the performance of several smaller groups: the center-right UDF-DSB "Blue Coalition," which has been plagued by high-profile infighting; the populist Order, Lawfulness and Justice party of controversial, so-called "corruption fighter" Yane Yanev, and ex-PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg's NMS, which has negligible popular support, but when it galvanizes core constituencies, has pulled out last-minute victories in the past.

18. (SBU) The parties and coalitions are topping their tickets with some of their most recognizable personalities (many of whom will be used as mere attention-grabbers and are unlikely to take up seats in Brussels). In a surprise move, the Socialists named respected Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin (who is not even a Socialist Party member) to head their ticket. Another well-known face, Nadezhda Mihailova, will lead the center-right Blue Coalition ticket. GERB's candidate list is headed by incumbent MEP Roumyana Zheleva, who is also said to be eyeing nomination as Bulgaria's next EU Commissioner. The struggling party of former King and PM Simeon is pinning its hopes for a comeback on popular EC Commissioner Meglena Kouneva, highly regarded both at home and in Brussels.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Seen here as merely "the first round of the general elections," the June 7 European elections themselves hold little interest for Bulgarian voters. The results will influence the second election, eliminating some players and boosting the chances of others, which raises the stakes for party strategists. Domestic issues will dominate the campaign as parties take off the

gloves to leave rivals weak and bloodied before the July race. It's
going to get ugly.

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